

To pass agenda, president faces test on party unity

By Peter Nicholas

[Chicago Tribune](#)

WASHINGTON - President [Barack Obama](#) is facing misgivings about his policy agenda from inside his own party, with prominent Democrats objecting to parts of his taxation and spending plans and questioning the White House push to do so much so fast.

Obama's strategy is to advance on all fronts. Buoyed by favorable poll numbers, he is moving to jolt the economy with a massive stimulus package, revamp the health-care system and push the nation toward renewable energy sources.

The president scored a major victory with the passage of his \$787 billion stimulus package. But holding together a Democratic coalition to pass the rest of his program could prove difficult.

Obama's party is peppered with legislators from conservative districts that are wary of a budget proposal that includes tax increases and deficit spending, even if tax cuts are also part of the plan. Already, Republicans have targeted some Democrats with advertisements pressuring them to reject Obama's plans.

Complicating matters, Obama is asking the political system in Washington to absorb a slew of legislation and policy shifts rivaling what President Franklin D. Roosevelt put forward 76 years ago. Going "all-in," in poker terms, puts a strain on a system used to a more incremental approach.

"The hardest part of this is Congress' digestive tract, which is rather challenged. We're not used to this," said Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.).

Fissures among Democratic lawmakers have already emerged. Rep. Eric Massa is a Democrat in a rural New York district where dairy farms and wineries have a major presence. The budget blueprint that Obama released last month would phase out subsidies to farmers with sales exceeding \$500,000 a year.

Massa said the cutoff would apply to "every single farm in my district." He added that if the payments are ended, "we're going to have a hard time passing this budget as it is."

"Frankly, I'm not about to abandon America's farms in favor of America's boardrooms. I won't be part of that plan," he said.

Rep. Harry Mitchell is a Democrat who represents a predominantly Republican district in

suburban Phoenix. Mitchell said he cannot support provisions in Obama's budget that would raise the capital gains tax for couples earning more than \$250,000 and halt the repeal of the estate tax in 2010.

If the White House won't relent, Mitchell said he would need to think carefully about whether to vote for the president's budget.

Describing his constituents, Mitchell said: "They're very cautious about taxes, and they're fiscally conservative."

For her part, Harman worries about the growing national debt. Obama's budget projects a \$1.75 trillion deficit for 2009.

"My concern is that my three grandchildren under 3 years old are paying for this, and I don't like that," she said.

Republicans hope to encourage defections from Obama's Democratic coalition, zeroing in on potentially vulnerable Democrats from more conservative districts. Last month they aired radio ads targeting 30 Democrats who voted for Obama's stimulus plan, including Massa.

Some Democrats insist the president needs to do more to cut back on spending. Obama has made a point of publicly criticizing earmarks-special projects inserted into spending bills, often to appease narrow interest groups. Yet Obama is planning to sign a \$410 billion spending bill now before the Senate that contains more than 8,500 earmarks totaling nearly \$8 billion.

White House aides have said the bill is a holdover and that Obama will take a tougher stance in the future.

Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.) said Obama's position was not good enough. He wants the president to veto the bill. In an interview, Bayh said that killing the bill would give Obama a chance to show he is serious about stamping out earmarks.

A veto would "set the tone for how we're going to deal with our fiscal problems going forward," Bayh said. "We're increasing spending many times the rate of inflation at a time when many families are cutting back. That could lead to voter anger-and rightfully so."

Part of Obama's job in maintaining his coalition is accommodating both the liberal and conservative wings, without sacrificing his larger goals.

Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) praised the White House agriculture policy that Massa derided. But Frank is not as pleased with Obama's plans on the war in Iraq.

Pieces of the president's agenda "won't play in the liberal parts," Frank said. "He might be staying longer in Iraq than I would want."

As Obama pushes, some Dems resist

Monday, 09 March 2009 00:00
